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Preface

This study was carried out and written shortly before Malta became an independent nation. Its purpose is to present a descriptive analysis of Maltese village politics. In many respects these are quite unusual, for in Malta, which has been administered as a fortress for the last four centuries, there are no village headmen, mayors or councillors to serve as links between their villages and the central government. But in spite of the highly centralized administration certain activities in the villages do play a part in the decision of both local and national issues, though at first sight they may not seem to be closely connected with politics as this is usually conceived. These are political activities, for as Prof. Lucy Mair has observed, politics is concerned with the ways persons and groups compete to influence the outcome of disputes and community decisions in accordance with their own interests.[1] The central problem can thus be divided into three major parts: first, to explore the relations between competing persons and groups; second, to examine the nature of the issues which concern them and the community; and third, to trace the channels through which they bring influence to bear on those who make the decisions.

After a brief sketch of Malta in time and space, I examine successively the articulation of the State, the Church and the political parties with the villages, the ties of neighbourhood and family, the social composition of the villages, and the basis of leadership. Against this background I show how issues which originate within the Church, and in particular over the cult of saints, affect village social organization. I then look at the effects of disputes arising out of issues of national policy. Finally, I examine the channels of influence open to the villagers.

Throughout this study I have been exclusively concerned with describing and analysing the political life of the villages of Malta and Gozo. But it has occasionally been necessary for me to make brief excursions into the field of national politics, for because of Malta's smallness, national political disputes swiftly become issues

[1] Lucy Mair, *Primitive Government* (London, Penguin Books, 1962), p. 10.

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653 Another very important function the Local Committees per-
665 formed during the period the MLP was in power was to obtain improvements for the village. Requests for drainage, new roads, street lighting and, above all, new schools, were submitted to the District Committees. There the proposals were screened and given priority ratings by the committee members and the district MLA's. When these projects were implemented, and a large number were, the Local Committees naturally received credit for them. This added to their claim to represent their villages, and strengthened the formal structure of the party.

647 This system of handling patronage and complaints gave the
662 villager a direct contact with authority. It was a fairly simple
665 procedure, and many considered it reasonably impartial, though of course it did help to be a member of the Labour Party in good standing. Moreover, the complainant, even though he might not succeed in his cause, had the satisfaction that it had received attention, and it did not cost him a nice fat rabbit. This does not
578 mean that there was no abuse. Civil servants complained that they
647 were often intimidated by zealous MLP members who threatened
66 to report them to their Ministers if they did not comply as requested. This friction was particularly keen between the Local Committee members and the village police, street sweepers and teachers. One head teacher I knew was particularly bitter about his caretaker, who was a member of the village MLP committee. The caretaker would stroll into the head teacher's office if he disagreed with the disciplining of a child, for example, and threaten to report him to the Minister if he did not lighten the punishment.

647 But on the whole, the MLP made a concerted effort to take
665 patronage out of the hands of canvassers and MLA's alike and chan-
662 nel it through the various committees of the party apparatus. This not only strengthened the party, it also won it considerable popularity. Moreover, it relieved MLA's and Ministers of a heavy administrative load; they were only called in on the more complicated matters. In short, the Local Committees came to function as branches of the government.

When the Labour Government resigned in 1958, the MLP clubs and committees lost the influence they had with government. They once more became merely propaganda and social centres. But the role they had played for three years in representing the interests of government at the village level and in

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557 662 66 does not rest easily until he has repaid it. This is as true of corporate groups such as the band clubs as it is of individuals Frequently the financial circumstances of the client, or the very nature of the favour, make it difficult or impossible for him to meet his obligation. His vote, and those of his family, provide the logical and accepted means to this end. This extends the relationship between patron and client to include that between politician and constituent.

66 Candidates who do not have the professional qualifications or high status necessary to recruit a following in this way are at a disadvantage. This is especially true for many of the Labour Party candidates, whose education and social standing at times compare unfavourably with those of their rivals. It was principally to overcome this handicap that the Labour Party sought to strengthen the party at the expense of individual candidates. It did this by limiting the system of political patronage which prevailed under previous governments and curbing the influence of the canvassers. In fact, the MLP officially forbade its candidates to employ canvassers. (Though, of course, many candidates have informal canvassers in their friends, relatives and clients.) At the same time, the party directed its propaganda at building up the image of the party and its leader. Labour supporters were constantly urged to vote for the party and not for individuals. By and large its campaign has been most successful. Its sympathizers not only vote for candidates who do not conform to the traditional image of the professional patron-politician, but they also vote across class lines, i.e. the teacher voting for an ex-dockyard fitter.

578 621 65 666 All candidates have to take into account the parochial rivalries which often cut across their districts. This is particularly true of the rivalry between the festa partiti. It has been noted that there is often a political polarity between festa partiti in the same village, and that sometimes the rivalry is so strong that partisans vote against a political party simply because a leading member of the rival partit is a candidate for it. But the number of people who place loyalty to their festa partit before support of a political party is declining. Nonetheless, if parochial rivalry no longer determines which party will get the votes, it very often decides which of the candidates within the party will. Many people have assured me that it is almost unheard of for a member of a festa partit to vote for a member of the rival partit, even though both support the

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same political party. Thus a politician who is also a leading member of a festa partit always asks a rival candidate from his party to come to his village and canvass the party votes from the opposite festa partit.

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Most people believe that politicians trade promises to assist festa partiti in return for votes. One well-known Labour politician who is the leader of the secondary festa partit in his own village, made such a promise to gain the support of a neighbouring secondary partit that was facing eviction. In return for the votes of the partit, he offered to introduce a bill into the Legislative Assembly which would prevent landlords from evicting band clubs. The proposition appealed to the partit and the bill, which [671] gained a great deal of support for the Labour Party from other clubs as well, became law.[1] In fact, it was one of the first laws the MLP enacted after it was returned to office in 1955. Partly as a result of his promise of assistance, but also because of his keen interest in the problems of secondary festa partiti, this candidate became so identified with this neighbouring partit that he had to ask MLP candidates from the other side of the electoral district to bid for the Labour votes of the members of the opposite partit. He naturally asked them to canvass the Labour votes of the titular partit in his own village as well.

But perhaps the most famous case of this kind, and certainly the most conspicuous, took place in Gozo. For many years the supporters of the Leone partit in Rabat had been embarrassed by the fact that the statue of their beloved patron could not be taken in processions from the cathedral. There was simply no way for her to pass through the walls of the old citadel in which the cathedral was situated. The members of the partit wished to remedy this by breaching the wall and making a large gate, but the Antiquities Board strongly opposed the idea. Finally, an ambitious MLP candidate came to their rescue. He is alleged to have promised them help if they voted for him. Whether the deal for votes is true I do not know. I do know, however, that the politician was elected and succeeded in having a huge new gate torn in the historic citadel. That he did this at public expense, against the orders of his [626] Ministers and in defiance of the Antiquities Board, is evidence of his ingenuity and single-mindedness. Of course, it might also have

[1] Act V, 1955: 'An Act to Amend the Reletting of Urban Property (Regulation) Ordinance.'

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been due to the amount of pressure that the partit brought to bear on him.

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But popularity, close contact with the electorate and the support of his party and festa partit are not always enough to assure the success of a candidate. In order to understand why this is so, it is necessary to examine the electoral process. The system of voting which has been used in Malta since 1921 is proportional representation with the single transferable vote. The country is divided into ten electoral districts, each of which returns five representatives to the Legislative Assembly. The districts are based on population density, and each averages about 15,000 registered voters. A candidate need not be resident in a district in order to stand for election there, and he can stand in two districts at the same time. If he is successful in both, he relinquishes one seat, which is then filled by a member of his party chosen in a by-election. At the polling booth each voter is given a ballot paper listing all the candidates standing in the district, and is required to rank them by placing a number against the name of each, to indicate the order of preference. After the polling is finished, all the ballot boxes from a district are opened simultaneously and the ballot papers mixed. The votes are then counted. As each paper is opened, a single vote is credited to the candidate to whom the voter has given first preference. This is the first count. A candidate is declared elected if he receives a certain proportion of the total number of votes cast.[1] After the first count the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated, and his votes are redistributed in accordance with the second preferences. The votes are then retotalled for the second count. The candidate with the lowest number of votes is again eliminated, and his votes are redistributed for the third count. The elimination of candidates and the redistribution of their votes continues until five candidates receive the required quota of votes.

Few candidates are elected on the first count, for the first preferences of the voters are generally distributed among a large number. First preferences reflect the popularity of a candidate and the size of his following, but the secondary votes he receives are

[1] This quota, the Droop quota, is one plus the total number of votes cast, divided by the number of seats (5) plus one.

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to switch to the party with best chance of success, for they know that if he is elected, he will channel patronage to them, often at the expense of the rest of his electoral district.

This system of voting also encourages contests between candidates from the same party. Such contests, carried out in public and in the heat of a campaign, often create hostility among the leaders of the party, and weaken its solidarity.

Finally, because this proportional system makes it possible for popular minority candidates to be elected, it encourages dissident factions to hive off from the major parties and found new ones. This seriously weakens the parent parties. Thus, although the only political division of real importance is that between the supporters of the Archbishop and those who favour Mintoff, there are now six political parties in Malta. It is not surprising therefore that the minority parties, and Miss Strickland's Progressive Constitutional Party in particular, are strongly in favour of retaining the present electoral system. Without it they would not be represented. The Malta Labour Party, which favours a strong two-party system, would prefer to see substituted an electoral system which would eliminate the smaller parties and strengthen the major parties. The Nationalist Party, although it would benefit from a change in the electoral system which would eliminate many of its rivals, has remained relatively silent on this point. This is because most of its leading members are patron-politicians of the old school. They owe their political life and the influence they command to the electoral system which has enabled them to build their own personal political organizations. The Nationalist Party is a party of respected and influential men, but in their strength lies its weakness. It is a party of politicians, rather than a politician's party. Dr. Borg Olivier, the Nationalist Prime Minister, is a first among equals; he does not lead his party in the sense that Mintoff leads the Malta Labour Party.

In short the Maltese system of proportional representation facilitates the emergence of minority parties. It also weakens the major parties by promoting intra-party rivalry and helping to keep alive the tradition of local patron-politicians. These factors militate against the development of a strong central government. It can be argued forcefully that Malta, which is facing a critical period in its economic and constitutional development, is now in greater need of a strong central government than ever before. It

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would therefore seem that as this need becomes more pronounced, and as the Maltese voter gains in sophistication, there will be increasing pressure to change the present system of voting to one which strengthens the national government rather than weakens it.

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In addition to personal kin ties, patrons, political parties and politicians, pressure groups provide yet another way by which the villager can influence authorities outside his community. By bringing interest groups from one village into contact with similar groups in other villages, they permit united action for the resolution of common problems. The band clubs and football clubs have active national associations. Village lay apostolate societies have their own national bodies as well as the Diocesan Coordinating Junta, a powerful body which has now become one of the strongest forces opposed to the MLP. In view of the important part it and the other Church societies played in defeating the Labour Party in the recent election, they will probably be able to provide a channel of contact with the Ministers and anti-Labour MLA's. Some have already begun to apply pressure to obtain playgrounds and public conveniences for their respective villages.

Even the festa partiti have their associations. The Association of Secondary Feasts works to obtain new Church privileges for its members. It is opposed by the Association of Titular Feasts, which has formally advised the Archbishop that if he grants privileges to the secondary partiti, its members will stop celebrating the titular feasts.

Finally, there are also a number of trade unions. Though most have no village level organization or representatives, and play no direct part in village politics, some, in particular the General Workers Union and the Gozo Agricultural Co-operative Society, a large proportion of whose members live in the villages, play an important part in national politics. They thus provide another channel through which persons at the village level can influence decisions at the national level.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
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CHAPTER I

Introductory

MY EIGHT CROWDED YEARS OF LIVING AND WORKING IN Malta—preceded by two brief halts as a temporary Naval Officer towards the end of the First World War—taught me a little about Maltese affairs and conditions, perhaps as much as a mere sojourner may expect to absorb in less than a decade. And the more I discovered about Malta and the Maltese, the better I grew to like both. What I then acquired, and retain, was an affection neither uncritical nor undiscriminating but based on the beginnings of understanding, I hope, of a small but complex community. I should be glad to think that something of what I have learned about and feel for those two remarkable little islands has found expression in the following pages.

This book is not a guide, it is not a handbook, it is not a history, it is not a collection of personal reminiscences, even if a personal note may be faintly audible here and there. It is above all not a commentary on Malta's politics, although I had my fill and more of these during my eight years. Twice during this period was Self-Government suspended and twice did I assume departmental charge under the Governor of the civil administration (having been concerned during Self-Government only with the Imperial side of the diarchy), a type of experience common enough among politicians returning from the wilderness to office but rare to the verge of uniqueness among Civil Servants. And there were other experiences scarcely less unusual.

Nor were Maltese politics of mere local, parish-pump range. Even in Homeric times Malta was looked upon as "the navel of the inland sea"; and the winds that blow upon it from every quarter, the cross-currents that buffet its rocky

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121 shores, are composed of more than the physical elements of air and water. The implications and repercussions of Maltese
●66 politics when I had experience of them were unfortunately often international and sometimes politico-ecclesiastical (these can be very prickly); not infrequently they impinged upon the most fundamental constitutional principles. For the relations between Church and State have given rise to controversies that have troubled Christendom since the Dark Ages; other Maltese problems were equally deeply rooted in a long and complicated past. Their implications and repercussions bore, in fact, a striking resemblance in certain directions to those of politics in the Palestine of the Mandate, where I had previously served. Happily the Maltese scene lacked one factor—the ambiguity of the established policy—which in Palestine made an administrator's life a hell on earth; in other respects politics in Malta could be almost as corrosive, almost as pervasive. But they will not pervade this book, nor even enter it except occasionally for the sole purpose of *constatation*, that untranslatable word.

121 These, then, are the things which this book is not. I find it less easy to state what it is. I have called it an "Account and an Appreciation" because I can think of no better definition of what I have tried to do in the chapters that follow. A reviewer of one of my previous books remarked that Malta was the only part of the Mediterranean about which I had not written. At least I have now repaired that omission, if omission it may claim to have been.

114 The book was begun in Malta, continued in Barbados,
[128] finished, of all places, in the Straits of Magellan, the eyewitness account of whose discovery, written by Antonio Pigafetta, a Knight of the Order of S. John, was dedicated to Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, the first Grand Master of the Order to reign in Malta. I left Malta in 1938, whisked from the land-locked Mediterranean, where from choice I had served during most of my career, to the greatest of the oceans, the Pacific, at the other side of the globe. Since my